

News Line 16

January 2002

Message from the Chair

The New Year's arrival brings us new opportunities to advance gender issues both within and outside INLW.

As I write, INLW members are preparing resolutions to submit to the annual congress of Liberal International, to be held this coming May in Budapest.

These resolutions address fundamental issues of gender equality, from marriage to member states of the United Nations adhering without reservation to the United Nations Convention on the nation against Women.

Discussion of issues concerning the Convention is particularly appropriate at this time, as women of the world prepare for the meetings of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women to be held in New York in March.



The Commission will consider the following two issues:

1. Eradicating poverty, including through the empowerment of women throughout their life cycle in a globalizing world.
2. Environmental management and mitigation of natural disasters: - a gender perspective. The Commission was established in 1946, to prepare recommendations to the UN Economic and Social Council on promoting women's rights in political, economic, civil, social and educational fields. The Commission's mandate was expanded in 1987 and again following the 1995 Beijing Conference; to integrate into its work a follow-up process to the Conference.

The Commission on the Status of Women now plays a crucial role in the policy planning and decision making process regularly reviewing the critical areas of concern in the Beijing Conference's Platform for Action.

I was honoured to have the opportunity to meet Dr. Sima Samar, a Deputy Prime Minister of the interim Afghan government, during her recent visit to Canada.

Dr. Samar spoke movingly about the plight of Afghan women. She reminds us of the need to integrate safety, security and relief from poverty into our agenda for improving the lives of women across the planet.

I know that many of you are working to relieve the difficulties faced by Afghan women, and I encourage you in your work.

It is my wish for each of you that you and your loved ones have a prosperous, peaceful and joyful New Year.

*The Honourable Mobina S.R. Jaffer,
Q.C., Senator
Chair, INLW*

Massoud: An Afghan Life

I have just returned from a five-week stay in Afghanistan. I was in Khoja Bahauddin when Commander Massoud was assassinated on September 9, the signal for terrorist operations in the US two days later. In fact, I lived two doors down from the two terrorists, in the guesthouse-cum-office next to the newly inaugurated guesthouse where Commander Massoud was staying. That Sunday, around 12:00 noon, as my American friend and I were getting ready to go to the village square to buy Afghan clothes, from the common patio that ran the length of the

guesthouse rooms I watched the two terrorists go for the 'interview, their camera(s) in a brown mustard color briefcase carried by Abdul, the waiter. They were accompanied by Fahim Dashti, the Afghan photographer, and Assim Suhail, the official of the ministry of Foreign Affairs in charge of both buildings. Of course, within 30 minutes, Commander Massoud was dead. So was Assim Suhail. Dashti and Massoud Khalili, the Afghan Ambassador to India were badly burned and injured. One of the terrorists was dead, split from the waist by the explosion in his belt, top part of his body partly burnt and stuck to the wall of the reception hall. The other terrorist whose first camera had shot Commander Massoud had taken his second camera and nonchalantly had walked out of the building and the courtyard, the shocked guards thinking he was still filming and was not part of the problem. He had reached the street before he was caught and locked in his room, guards staying outside the door. He had climbed the little window and jumped into the cemetery adjacent to the guesthouse. From there he had run down the plateau towards the Panj River, a fifth of a mile away. That is when officials realized he had gotten away. Two guards with kalashnikovs and several other officials, some of them barefoot (Afghans take off their shoes when they are inside) ran after him. The pursuers wanted to catch him alive but he was more than six feet tall and very strong and was able to snatch one of the kalashnikovs. That is when the second Kalashnikov fired on him, the fifth bullet dropping him in the river. By the time they took him out of the water, he was dead.

When we returned around 1:30 p.m., all was silent. The square and all the shops, the women in the fields, the village water carriers, the girls picking up dung for fuel, the men going to the public bath; the workers erecting the new hospital, the mullahs' call to prayer, all had fallen silent. I think even the babies had stopped crying. The silence was palpable, like the sun pounding on the Sahara at noon. As if life had deserted the village. Like a face turning, blank, the entire scenery, the homes on the dry dusty plateau, the river banks full of rice paddies and corn fields, the fruit orchards further out, the refugee camps nearby, the mountains in the distance, even the sun and the sky, all felt desolate and abandoned.

When you are in a state of war for as long as these people have lived you develop a sixth sense., Nobody told these people what had happened; they had heard an explosion and seen a plume of smoke coming from the two-building compound at the edge of the village. Their ears differentiate the types of explosions and smokes. They had known instantaneously what had occurred. My American friend and I could not tell. In the compound, only Nasser was softly crying and told me that Assim was killed but that Commander Massoud was not hurt (He would not change his story for the next six days).

We waited all afternoon in the hot dusty sun. I asked to go in and take pictures to bring back to the world about the atrocities outsiders are committing in Afghanistan but was told that security was still busy searching and (would get my chance later. By late afternoon, one of the vans came bringing Assim's coffin, scheduled to be flown to Panjsher the next morning. There are no morgues and so the challenge was how to keep the dead cool until morning. The solution after much discussion was to keep the coffin in the courtyard, in front of his office and our rooms. They had to scrounge around to find something to serve as a table for the coffin and a cloth large enough to serve as a covering over it to keep away the ever-present dust, flies, bees and mosquitoes (too poor to have desks and chairs Afghans now mostly work, eat, sleep and visit on the floor). And for coolness, they scrambled to find enough oil for the generator (their allotment is for two hours of electricity per night) and hooked their only electric fan to it, after creating a makeshift extension cord and making another contraption for a table high enough for the fan to blow over the coffin for the duration of the night - - until around early morning, when the heat lets up a bit for a short spell.

My heart was bleeding for a myriad of reasons: For the forgotten Afghanistan, for the lack of basic necessities, for the curse that even death does not bring comfort, for Assim's terrifically-promising future ,cut short, for such a tragic death; and for a life where ,everyone has to pitch in to find a table, a covering, food for all present, room for all to sleep in, security for all to be safe, guards to prevent another disaster, alert that the Taliban don't attack; for insuring that there is enough water, brought from the river in big pitchers on the back of donkeys, to keep the canisters in the washroom full (there are no bathrooms with running water), enough broken mud-brick pieces that serve as toilet paper in the latrine; for no telephones, radios, cars... There was no time to mourn, digest, even pray, everyone was busy doing the work that was needed to be done in the compound. What a life that you cannot spare a moment to shed a tear over your dead! These officials, very few in number, were doing all the work cheerfully; that was their duty not to show that Commander Massoud was also dead. Even after they returned with Assim's coffin and I could see that their shirts were bloodstained, they told me it was from washing Assim's body. On this day in Virgo, the month of Commander, Massoud's birth, how their hearts must have felt, those who knew the truth!

People were coming into the compound in ones and twos, Assim's brothers, other fighter friends, village elders, their faces now indistinguishable as the sun was going down. Zubair who had finished the arrangements for his boss's coffin came to me and asked me to convey to the two non-Afghan guests that we would be spending the night elsewhere. His gracious explanation was that Assim's friends were planning to hold an all-night vigil of reciting the Koran and he did not want our sleep to be disrupted. I knew that it was really an even more gracious concern that was pushing them to send us away: They did not know if they were going to be attacked that night and wanted to spare the lives of the three westerners (Barbara Bick, my Jewish American friend, Roland, a Frenchman and me, an Afghan American)! We took our night stuff and were driven in a jeep to a far away dark serai of totally dark rooms. I could not tell where in relation to the village we were but we were shown to two rooms, Roland by himself and Barbara and I in a corner room that boasted a washroom inside. A gas lantern, water pitcher and basin, hot green tea, skewered kabob with bread, grapes and cut up water melon were quickly brought in by the help, an Uzbek boy of 13. Two hours later Zubair and Daud showed up to apologize for the inconvenience. I could not hold my tears at the warmth of this hospitality during such a time - - as if they had no other worry. They assured us that a guard would be outside our door all night long and that we would go back to the compound for breakfast.

That was the longest night of my life. When you see the living face of terror, you become weary of all faces, all movement, not knowing who else might also be evil, where else another attack might come and when. In the dark I kept listening for another terrorist lurking outside while trying not to move so as not to wake up Barbara. And when you are anticipating the worst, even little things become sources of further fear and anxiety. I was smoking and trying to keep my hair, face, body and feet - totally covered with the sheet that was my cover an impossible and really hazardous task. You see, earlier, I had noticed the ceiling made of crude reefs held by cruder tree trunks across, and was sure that scorpions and all sorts of crawlies would fan from the cracks of such a rustic and primitive construct. What gave me sustenance was the dim glow of the gas light, now outside with the guard, coming through a tiny opening of a window high in the wall and covered with dried thistle instead of glass. The sound of roosters, donkeys and cows singing, an otherwise annoying regular nightly serenade, also comforted me that I was in the middle of the village surrounded by a human population of my own Afghans.

Still, I could not shake from my mind the image of the two terrorists, one, tall, with light-colored slightly plump face and curly dark hair of North Africa, wearing khaki jeans and plaid blue and green shirt checkered with some red, maybe 28 to 30 years old; the other, a shorter man of about 35-38 years old, with darker chiseled face, long high nose, almond eyes and extremely straight hair of a couple of shades lighter than dark with wide shoulders and muscles like a body-builder's, wearing very expensive and slick pants of medium dark green and over it, a tailored shirt of dark ecru with long sleeves with cuffs and open collar, throwing self-conscious glances over his shoulder like a country bumpkin in his Sunday best (actually worried about that belt of his), not looking at all like a North African but rather more like a Yemeni or a Libyan or a Berber... Even the Arabic I heard them speak was different to my ears from Moroccan dialect but I could be wrong as my friend Shoukria Haidar, a teacher of Moroccan and Algerian students in France for twelve years, who spoke with them for forty minutes in French on our first day of arrival thought they were Moroccan but found it odd that Moroccans who are so preoccupied with their own country would come this far in search of just an interview. In the helicopter that had brought her, our friend Françoise and them from Panjsher her eye was caught by the fact that in this hot hot land the shorter man was wearing very thick corduroy pants. I realized that the tall one must have become worried that someone spoke Arabic and had heard their conversations when that morning I saw him come out of the washroom and asked him in Arabic if there was enough water left. He was very taken aback and answered with one tiny word of two-letters (if, meaning there is) and bolted into his room, leaving me thinking what a non-Arab behavior and what a shy journalist!

On the following Thursday, Barbara was flown to Dushanbe to catch her flight to the US and me, still not knowing Commander Massoud had been assassinated, to Panjsher to join the rest of our delegation. In Panjsher, Sara Felix, another member of our American fact-finding team, on seeing me held me in her arms for five full minutes. She was shaken by the news of the terrorists and by the Taliban bombing the day before that had fallen on top of the mountain beside her, now our, guesthouse. The next day, with the help of our hosts from the ministry of Foreign Affairs we were able to send back Sara, Mary MacMakin and the other three guests to Dushanbe (where they arrived six days later just in time to catch their plane to Europe, only Mary who went to Faizabad by road through the Anjoman Pass returned from half-way, to finally go by helicopter. Her story of going from Faizabad to Pakistan, one of the most interesting journeys I have heard can be read at www.Parsa.com).

On Saturday Commander Massoud's assassination was announced and the funeral set for Sunday. As is the Afghan custom, Dr Nilab Mobarez, an Afghan woman living in France and now visiting Panjsher to inspect her clinic, and I went to his house to extend our condolences to his wife. On our return I asked that we, the women at the guesthouse be allowed to attend the funeral, normally a men-only ceremony. My reasoning was that Commander Massoud was the first Afghan leader to have signed the Declaration of the Essential Rights of Afghan Women, a document my association, NEGAR-Support of Women of Afghanistan helped three hundred Afghan women draft and sign in June of 2000 and a document which we are trying to make part of the peace process in the United Nations so it gets to the next constitution of Afghanistan. I said I wanted to personally pay my respect to this fallen friend of Afghan women. They accepted and so we were four women who attended the funeral, two journalists, Nilab and myself.

Early Sunday morning, we were driven to the village of Jangalak, Commander Massoud's ancestral village. We walked down to the plain adjacent to the Panjsher River across from Commander Massoud's house perched on the side of the mountain. On our way we drove by school girls on balconies, with their uniform on, with pictures of Commander Massoud or flags or flowers waving and with tears flowing down: their cheeks; we heard and saw women on rooftops; their colorful dresses flutter in the small breeze, and wailing; and groups of grief-stricken men walking towards the plain from every direction, some in " military garb, most dressed in everyday clothes, many wearing the patou (shawl) over their piran tunban (shirt and long pants of the same light material, always worn by Afghan villagers but now, in their poverty and villagized state, worn by urban populations as well), many wearing the pakol hat that Commander Massoud made famous, others wearing the regular turban of Afghanistan or bareheaded, many carrying large banners or holding pictures. Beautiful voices from slow moving cars, were reciting glorious poetry of Afghanistan; uniformed security patrols gently guiding the multitude. And all along this sole Panjsher road, there were the bulky, upturned and rusted carcasses of Soviet artillery, tanks and armored personnel carriers, silently but unmistakably reminding us of Commander Massoud's greatest victory and successful partnership with America.

The plain area was very large, along the riverbank, with several sections to it, defined by rows of trees. To the right of us were all military people. To the left it was cordoned off by plastic mesh, reserved for the dignitaries and for the helicopter that was to bring Commander Massoud's body. We were taken to this area. We watched and photographed the famous and mighty of the free Afghanistan as they came in groups: President Rabbani, Mr. Sayyaf, Haji Qadir, Mr. Hamoon, Commander Bismillah Khan, Mr. Qanooni, Commander Khoshal Qol, Mr. Sabawoon, Mr. Imad... We scrambled to get pictures of Ahmad, Commander Massoud's 12-year old son, who came a little later. He had arrived from a private viewing of his father's body- Dressed in a khaki suit and walking with serious steps, Ahmad was quickly surrounded by the media. His mannerisms, style and gait are completely like his father's. His words were the most effective. Composed and with gestures reminiscent of his dad's, he said, 'my father's killing was unjust and despicable. Now the world knows that his struggle was just and his words true. His untimely death will not cut short our fight for an independent Afghanistan. We will continue with more fervor. I will not rest but work to realize his dream: His composure and his confident knowledge of the situation made me understand what this war of independence has done to every man, woman and child living this war inside Afghanistan. I felt so unprepared and awkward by comparison.

When the helicopter finally landed and the dust and wind subsided the crowd could no longer keep back its emotion. By now there were thousands of men in the plain area (the official count later was 24000) and every one to a man, moaning aloud like thunder, rushed in unison to hold the coffin. Dr. Abdullah who came with the copter, tears streaming down his cheeks too, kept begging them to hold back so the helicopter door could be opened. No way. The weeping multitude was chanting endearments mixed with verses of the Koran and was pushing. Finally, the security in charge of the plain reached the copter; pushed the crowd aside and the pilot opened the door to bring out this hero of Afghanistan and this beloved of all of them for his final journey. The coffin draped in the green, black and white flag and verses of the Koran and people throwing flowers on it was carried to the widest part of the plain, tenderly like a most cherished son, thousands of hands reaching to touch it once as if that one touch would give them a piece of him forever. In front, Mr. Qanooni was standing on a jeep and through a loudspeaker directing the emotional and totally heedless crowd to set the coffin before them and form long rows for the funeral. prayer. I respectfully kept near the jeep, facing the massive crowd and taking pictures, and approached the coffin and prayed only after the men's prayer had finished. The solemnity of the prayer, broken only by the rush of the Panjsher, had a calming effect. But, again all wanted to carry the coffin to the road and place it on the armored personnel carrier that was to take it to Saricha, the designated gravesite. Again Dr. Abdullah managed to get up first and direct the pallbearers, thousands of emotional feet rushing as if a flood was drowning the plain.

Saricha is a mountaintop where Commander Massoud kept his command post. It is several hundred feet higher than the surrounding villages of Khanayz and Tulkha on the river bank. It is several kilometers from Jangalak and you had to pass the villages of Bazarak, Shekhan, Rahman Kheyli, Mullah Kheyli and Laghana - - all uphill. Its beauty lies not only on its command of the entire valley up to Sangana and down to Dashtak, with vistas of many lush green villages jutting out of the mountainsides, and the rushing Panjsher River winding past it. Saricha's immediate horizon to the south east is the magnificent peaks of the Hindu Kush with stark majesty unparalleled, a fitting place: That which makes Afghanistan eternally unconquerable is now holding in its arms one of its own, an undefeated son of Afghanistan.

I was separated from the other women but found the BBC reporter clutching at a small tree trunk and hesitant to pass the throngs. We held arms and we walked for about one village until she left me to get up the mountainside to get a larger view of the procession. I remained among my Afghan people, thousands of men of all ages who upon noticing me would tell those in front 'let our sister pass', 'take her hand to cross the ditch', 'watch for her that she doesn't slip over the rocks', 'help her go over the bridge' and many other warm acknowledgements. With their backs hunched in sorrow and many still wiping their tears, not the moment to engage them in my banalities, but I could tell by their words and their faces that I was shoulder to shoulder with Pashtuns and Hazaras and Uzbeks and Turkmens and Noorestanis and Tajiks and Baluchis and... That day, along the road to Saricha, and at Saricha, around the gravesite, the whole of Afghan mosaic was a single human quilt unified in their grief and bonded by the memory of one of their own.

On the third day of the mourning which is the *women's day' (also called the wake), Nilab and I went to Mrs. Massoud's. The house is on a mountainside. The driveway is around a high hill hiding the house from the view. Then you enter the gate and go up several sets of flagstone steps, each reaching a terrace and each lined with fruit trees, their golden delicious apples still green and hanging onto their branches to ripen. Each terrace is a garden of many colored flowers planted in large sections, reminiscent of Paghman, the summer resort of my days (37 years ago), petunias of many pink and red hues, phloxes of white and salmon, tall asters of delicate purple, large and small marigolds, riots of pansies and grand rose bushes both damask and grandiflora. Each terrace also has small fountains and waterfalls drowning the receding sound of the Panjsher. The last terrace turns into a large patio that through an orange painted wooden fence opens into the inner courtyard. Then you finally see the house, a large structure, its three stories taller than normal, and with its light blue paint and large white windows unlike the houses of Panjsher but again much like what I remember of Paghman's homes. And yet what you actually notice is the mountain, as if the house and its gardens are pasted on it, close, colossal and in its stony barrenness, beautiful.

We arrived around 11:15 a.m. and as we walked into the inner courtyard were engulfed by sound of explosions, airplanes flying overhead and by pandemonium of hundreds of women running to the basement. Ahmad was standing in the courtyard urging them to be calm and asked us to enter the shelter as the Taliban were bombing the house and although as yet none had fallen on the house specifically, the women were panicky and he wanted them to go to the shelter and we should too. When we found out that his mother was still upstairs in the formal mourning room, we said we would join her. After a half-hour the sounds stopped. I later learned that the bombs had fallen a kilometer away, in Padrukh.

Inside, Mrs. Parigul Massoud could not show her face, her beautiful green eyes shot from crying and her cheeks swollen, she kept a large thick white scarf over her, mostly covering her face. She talked about the hardest and loneliest night of her life, when she was informed about his death but due to security no one could come to see her. She and her mom spent the whole night crying and comforting the scared and sobbing children. She talked about how good he looked in the coffin. And about his wounds, how his heart area had a two inch scar and scattered around it thousands of red pellets on his chest, but that his neck area was completely void of scars, his moon-colored skin still beautiful; the scar in his back, larger, about five inches long. His face had scratches and his hair and beard were a little scorched. She said she was wracking her brain but found not one angry word uttered by him at home in all the years they were married. He had told her she could wear whatever she wanted in whatever color she wanted and run the house however she preferred. I asked and she gave me permission to take pictures of the wake and get signatures for our Declaration from the hundreds of women that had also come to share this moment of common grief and tragedy. She told me 'start right away because people leave early to get home before dark'

All through the day, her five daughters, ages ten to three, on seeing and hearing their mother cry, would come to her every other moment and she would hug and caress them and tell them

to go out and be with the guests, only she had a bottle for the youngest, and she would feed her and rock her to sleep in her lap. She told us that her husband was very fond of the youngest and whenever home would bathe her himself, kiss her tiny feet and tell her a story before putting her to sleep. She mentioned that he was interested in the children's education and was happy when she renovated the destroyed mosque of Jangalak into a village school and sent the kids there. He often asked the children what they wanted to become when they grew up. One time, Ahmad had said he wanted to be a soldier like him and he had said 'don't become one because then you will be like me, away from home all the time, become a medical doctor;' another time a daughter had said she wanted to become a pilot and he had said 'and you will be shot down and I will lose a daughter; become a teacher instead.' How they all missed him!

During lunch I asked Mrs. Massoud what dishes her husband had liked best. She said he did not like doughy foods and was partial to 'shorba' (Afghan soup) but never complained. She said that she could not find enough variety to prepare for him to take to the fronts (sometimes as long as six months, once a whole year and most often several weeks to three months} as he liked non-fatty things that didn't spoil or get rancid. On my way back, in Khoja Bahauddin, I stayed in the same fateful guesthouse and had a conversation with one of his bodyguards that had been with him for eight years and now kept watch over the closed reception hall, who mentioned that Commander Massoud also liked fresh fruit, his proud eyes filling up with tears at the thought of his cherished Amer Saheb (dear boss, in Dari, Commander Massoud's nickname throughout the area). And I remembered Dr. Abdullah's story too, of how one day, on the spur of the moment, the two of them had gone mountain climbing and Commander Massoud had taken an apple with him. On the way up he had gone faster and Dr. Abdullah was way behind. But on trying to catch up, tired and thirsty, he had come upon half of an apple, stuck on the crack of a stone with Commander Massoud's penknife, waiting for him.

The official mourning room was the living room, L-shaped and large with a wall for TV and videocassettes, among them, Mission Impossible, Gandhi, The Sniper and Martial Arts. Upstairs, I visited some men of the family in a small office full of shelves. Right above the living room and almost as large, was Commander Massoud's library, the only room of the house that had furniture instead of the mats used for sitting. He is known to have loved to read and was fond of writing. In fact, the night before his assassination he stayed up very late reading poetry with Massoud Khalili; and he kept a diary for over 20 years, writing every night.

Two walls of the library have continuous shelves, a third, shelves and a window. The fourth wall is all windows overlooking the valley and the Panjshir. His desk, still with pens and note pads on it, in the corner of these two window walls, takes in the panorama, this Afghan symphony of mountain, river and countryside, forever enduring, pristine and unchanged. On the side of the desk, stands a large bookshelf that only has dictionaries, from very small sizes to the largest (I had never seen such large Dari dictionaries before). On the other shelves, I spotted the translated works of Ibn Khaldun, many books by Ali Shariati, many copies of the Koran and texts on Islam, shelves full of poetry books, many many books on politics and diplomatic relations, many works about history of countries, especially neighbors of Afghanistan, Kalilah Damna, translations of works by Freud and Sartre, tomes on philosophy, books in Arabic. I was surprised that I did not find a lot about military or warfare or famous biographies or books written by Afghans. Also missing were pictures, tableaus and other ornaments on the walls; completely missing were his own mementos, except for the dictionaries shelf the other shelves were not full to the brim, rather more like a work in progress. He may not have had time to open all his book cartons as I later learned that Commander Massoud had lived in the house for only twenty days before he was assassinated (his wife also lamented that for the first time in their life they had a house of their own and what she would do with it now that he was gone). He had apparently designed it himself, his first love being architecture, he had selected the paint colors and he had even installed the thin cheap carpeting so common in Panjshir himself (he had to borrow the cutting knife from a relative and upon returning it had boasted that he might have a future as a carpet installer)!

I sat at his desk to get a better feel and realized it was a desk for writing. I sat at the sofa bed in front of the windows and realized that is where he must have read (that is also where Dr. Abdullah slept when he was visiting). I thought of all the books written about him, all the pictures taken of him, of his exploits, victories, trials, and mistakes, of him as a political leader, as a military genius, of him as a husband, a father, a friend, of the span of his life so important for Afghanistan and the world. And I thought how wonderful it would be to have a library built in his name. He had built his own dream house and library. It would be a marvelous affirmation of our Afghan life if there is also a national library for him, this freedom fighter of Afghanistan who built with his rifle the history of our times.

[Please note that I have reconstructed the sequence of events from 12:20 p.m. to 1:30 p.m. of September 9, i.e., during and immediately after the assassination, based on what I heard from several people, both Afghan and non-Afghan in Khoja Bahauddin and Panjsher, and Dashti and Khalili's pronouncements in the press. However, I never asked for an official account.]

Nasrine Gross

[Nasrine Gross, an Afghan American writer is the Washington representative of Negar-Support of Women of Afghanistan. Her books are "Memories of the First Girls' High School in Afghanistan" and "Steps of Peace and our Responsibility as Afghans". Her e-mail address is iskabultec@erols.com.]

Poverty, Violence and Terrorism

Some 1.1 billion people worldwide are estimated to be living in absolute poverty, and 70% of them are women.

Poverty is the root cause of world conflict, and a major cause of women's continuing oppression. It is both the cause and the effect of women's powerlessness. Fundamentalist faiths lose no time in reducing women to destitution, by denying them education, paid employment and any rights to property. Combined with lack of any State welfare system and any control over their own fertility, countless women are soon reduced to absolute indigence, entirely dependent upon their husbands or scraps of charity. Increased domestic violence and prostitution, together with child neglect, are the well documented, inevitable consequences. In Iran and Afghanistan, government condoned violence against women includes public stoning, hanging, blinding and flogging.

This is terrorism, less dramatic than the terrible attack upon the twin towers of the World Trade Organization, but terrorism all the same, practiced against one half of a population and bringing premature death to millions. Women worldwide have good cause to support the campaign against terrorism.

In patriarchal western countries, absolute poverty is rare but poverty in the sense of living far below the accepted standard of living, enduring unhealthy homes, food and surroundings, deprived of normal social opportunities and career expectations, is sadly far from rare. Again, most of the sufferers are women. The shameful UK record is that 32% of our children live in such homes - by far the highest percentage of any EU State.

In the west, women have equality in education and are free to work, but many families sink into poverty with the arrival of children. Our governments may not be fundamentalist, but our social values still seem distorted, when we penalize parents for producing and rearing the generation on which our future depends. Again, the burden is borne predominantly by women. Over a working lifetime, an unskilled woman in UK will earn £ 197,000 less than a man in comparable work. If she becomes a mother of two, that gap grows to £ 482,000. Skilled women do better but the gap is still £ 381,000. It widens again for single parent, 90% of whom are women.

On 17 October 2000, the International Day Against Poverty, representatives from 150 countries met in Dag Hammarskjold Plaza to present a petition containing 17 demands to end women's poverty and violence against women. The petition carried 4,616,352 signatures.

Women's poverty and its eradication is one of the themes to be discussed at the next annual meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in March 2002. The subject could not be more important. Elimination of women's poverty would do more than any other measure to bring about gender equality and democracy and remove a major source of world conflict. It is no coincidence that women's emancipation goes hand in hand with a country's prosperity.

I am glad the Newsline has at last resumed publication. It used to be our main means of keeping in touch and should become so again.

*Elizabeth Sidney
INLW Special Advisor*

Afghan Women Share Their Messages of Hope

Jan 2, 2002

As the New Year began, two Afghan women who serve on the staff of the International Rescue Committee in Pakistan sent messages to the world about their hopes for the future of their homeland. 80th women work for the IRC's Female Education program for Afghan refugees-and accordingly are contributing to the effort to ensure that young Afghan women are equipped with the knowledge and skills that will help them rebuild their homeland.

Razia Stanikzai, Field Manager, Female Education program:

The lullabies for our children have been mingled with the sounds of rockets and bombs ...

My message to the world is that Afghans have many wounds to heal. They need each other and need the understanding and help of the entire world to heal. Please assist us in patching up the rifts in our nation, by stopping backing up the factions involved in war. No more bombing and bloodshed. We have bled a lot. The war has sapped our strengths for over the decades. Now we are making the very steps towards peace with your help. We need each other to build internal strength and that would not succeed if we are not supported externally. The Lullabies for our children have been mingled with sounds of rockets and bombs for decades. Let them experience peace. Please let us heal and understand each other after decades of chaos. Our children do not know how is it to live in peace. There is so much strength behind our hopes. Peace in Afghanistan contributes to the peace in world.

Wahida Furmul, program Assistant, Female Education program:

I want to see the girls and boys going to schools and women and men to have jobs and respect...

I want this next year to be a year of joy and hope for Afghan women and children. I want to see the girls and boys going to schools and women and men to have jobs and respect. I want to work for my country and want the world to recognize my contribution as a woman to my country's cause. I want the world to continue supporting Afghanistan. I want the neighboring countries to stop interfering in Afghan affairs and stop stoking the fire of conflict and war in my country.